

The diachrony of Basque accentuation: comparative method and internal reconstruction

In this presentation I address two main issues that remain open in the reconstruction of Common Basque accentuation: The origin of a tonal accent contrast in a small Central area and accentogenesis in Common Basque.

Regarding accentuation and from a diachronic point of view, we can distinguish two major areas in the Basque-speaking territory, a Western-Central area and an Eastern area, where the boundary between the two roughly coincides with the course of the Bidasoa river (Hualde 2022). The facts are particularly complex in the Western-Central area, where we find many differences among local varieties regarding both the accentual rules and the phonetic realization of accentual prominence. What serves as unifying factor in the Western-Central area is that, to the extent that local varieties have contrastive accent (i.e. exceptions to the general accent rule), the same words and classes of both words tend to show marked accentuation (e.g. all plurals, certain compounds and derived words, certain borrowings). Although for the most part there is now agreement regarding the diachronic developments that have given rise to the different accentual systems found within Western-Central Basque (see Hualde 2003), an issue where opposite hypotheses have been put forward in recent work is the origin of a contrast between high-toned and low-toned accents in a small Central area (Goizueta and surrounding area, mostly in Navarre). Whereas in some work this has been claimed to have resulted from a relatively recent dialectal development (Hualde 2007, Egurtzegi & Elordieta 2022), in other work the tonal accent contrast is reconstructed for at least Proto-Western-Central Basque (Hualde 2012, 2022). Here I show that in order to explain the interdialectal correspondences that we find, we need to postulate two classes of accented words in Proto-Western-Central Basque, in addition to a larger unaccented class. This interdialectal comparative evidence has not been sufficiently considered before. The interdialectal correspondences that we find in words with bisyllabic stems are the following ([+1] = initial accent, [+2] peninitial accent):

	Western	Central	Goizueta	Reconstr.	Example
1	Unaccented	[+2]	[+2 High]	Unaccented	gizon ‘man’
2	[+2]	[+1]	[+2 Low]	[+2 Low]	gizòn-ak ‘(the) men’
3	[+1]	[+1]	[+1 Low]	[+1 Low]	màlko ‘tear’
4	Unaccented	[+2]	[+1 High]	[+1 High]	lóre ‘flower’

Correspondence 2 is obtained when items in the majority class (= correspondence 1) bear certain inflectional suffixes, including the plural. These correspondences are most straightforwardly explained by postulating that the Proto-system had a class of unaccented words (like Western Basque) and two smaller classes of accented words, of different origins (compounds vs loanwords), most likely differentiated by their tonal melody (like in present-day Goizueta). I will consider in detail the diachronic evolution from the reconstructed proto-system to each of the modern Western-Central systems.

A second issue that is explored in this presentation is that of accentogenesis in Common Basque, which has consequences for the exact diachronic link between Western-Central and Eastern accentual systems. Jacobsen 1975 [2022] notices that marked accentuation arising from the contraction of vowel sequences is found in both Western-Central and Eastern areas and claims that this is the original source of accent in Common Basque. Here I will demonstrate that these contractions are all relatively recent developments. All prior prosodic distinctions were lost in Eastern Basque as a consequence of a shift of the accent from the initial or pen-initial syllable to the penultimate (Michelena 1977, Hualde 2007), but later contractions of vowel sequences have sometimes resulted in convergent developments between dialects.

References

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